

February 3, 2016

Joyce Rowley
Friends of Ruth & Emily, Inc.
49 Orchard St.
New Bedford, MA 02740

Dear Joyce Rowley,

I am writing this letter of support for the relocation of Asian Elephant named Ruth from the City of New Bedford's Buttonwood Park Zoo to a protected contact facility that can better meet her medical, physical, and social needs. A protected contact elephant sanctuary may have the ability to provide a more natural and socially diverse environment for elephants than space constricted and cold climate zoos. Having worked for the past two and a half years as a veterinarian at a popular elephant sanctuary in Thailand, I have seen the benefits of diverse social interaction and freedom to forage, roam and interact in a natural environment. From the time I first began my work, 36 elephants have been relocated to the sanctuary some traveling as far as 1,500km and more than 30 hours on a trailer. In many cases, the elephants were geriatric (estimated to be more than 55 years old), had very poor body condition, and/or had sustained severe injuries prior being relocated. The vast majority of these elephants have improved in health, formed or joined social groups, and appear to enjoy their life of retirement. Like many of my elephant patients, I believe Ruth's health and quality of life could improve with relocation.

Ruth is currently being managed predominately in free contact. In free contact management systems, the elephant handler must have a dominant role in the relationship between him or herself and the elephant. Incident reports from the Buttonwood Park Zoo document numerous episodes of aggression from Ruth towards handlers placing them at risk of injury or death. Punishment in the form striking or hitting Ruth followed by requiring her to perform a series of behaviors has been used to reestablishing the dominance of the handler after an episode of aggression. In protected contact, the risk of Ruth injuring a handler would be eliminated therefore allowing Ruth to express herself without the need to be punished. At the facility where I work, a protective contact program is being established for medical procedures. There are many geriatric elephants in the program who have been trained in traditional methods and worked nearly their entire life in free contact. These elephants are still capable of learning in protective contact and willing to participate in medical behaviors when given the choice and freedom to make decisions.

A protected contact facility or elephant sanctuary in a warmer climate may provide health benefits for Ruth. Ruth's medical records indicate that she has had evidence of arthritis and is losing joint mobility in her right front carpus (wrist). The freedom to roam and encouragement to utilize the acreage of a sanctuary can benefit elephants suffering from arthritis. Warmer climates can also improve joint mobility and comfort. In the wild, Asian elephants predominately live in tropical climates. Subzero temperatures are not compatible with elephants and as was documented in Ruth's case, can cause potentially life

threatening injuries. As a result of the incident on January 3, 2014 in which Ruth was found outside in subzero temperatures during a snowstorm, she sustained severe frostbite of her ears, distal tail, and vulva. This resulted in sloughing of portions of her ears, necrosis of a portion of her tail, and draining tracts and regions of necrosis around her vulva. Her ears and vulva took six months to heal and her tail required partial amputation in November 2014. Although policies were promptly put in place to prevent future similar incidences, a warmer climate would certainly allow Ruth to safely spend more time outdoors especially in the winter. In addition, a well-staffed elephant sanctuary or protective contact facility may be able to provide 24 hour monitoring and more consistent and frequent veterinary assessments and treatments for ailments. This may be increasingly necessary as Ruth ages.

Environmental and social enrichment is extremely important to the health and wellbeing of elephants. Rees (2000) has suggested that interaction with other elephants provides the single most significant form of enrichment to the lives of those animals kept in appropriately structured social groups. In my experience, the freedom to choose their own companions, diverse interaction with the environment, and the ability to forage for food has positive effects on the quality of life of elephants. Buttonwood Park Zoo does meet the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) minimum standard for indoor and outdoor space for their two elephants, however, a warmer climate and larger facilities would enhance and increase the range of enrichment that can be provided to Ruth. In 2001, the AZA recommended that institutions should hold at least three female elephants (AZA, 2001). There is also some question to whether or not Ruth and Emily are compatible companions. At a facility with more space and a larger population of elephants, Ruth may be able to find a more fitting social group.

Overall, Ruth is in good health and with appropriate and thorough preparation, the risks of relocation can be reduced. I have personally seen many geriatric and disabled elephants successfully relocated within Thailand, some traveling more than 1,500 km. Some may argue that transfers may cause stress to the animal who is being moved and to the members of the receiving group. However, there is some evidence that this stress is neither prolonged nor severe (Schmid, Heistermann, Ganslosser, & Hodges, 2001). Ruth would benefit from a protected contact management system, warmer climate, greater variety in social and environmental enrichment, and more stable veterinary care. To provide Ruth with a greater quality of life for her remaining years, relocation should be strongly considered.

Sincerely,

Erica Ward, DVM

References

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